

WORLDLINESS RECONSIDERED

February 11, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Acts 2:42-47

Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth...the light of the world."

-Matthew 5:13,14 (RSV)

"You are the salt of the earth..."

Of one thing we are sure. Salt is not very good for us and we eat too much of it. Nutritionists warn that it lies hidden in near lethal doses in the most innocent boxes and cans and packages and that it is possible to do serious damage to your blood pressure at the breakfast table. And so, we've learned new respect, or at least we've learned to try to sit near the shaker so we can have some discreetly, or we wait until the conversation rises to a new level of enthusiasm before whispering clandestinely to the person next to us - "pass it, please...you know, the salt."

I was thrilled to encounter an alternative word, even with tongue in cheek, while reading a book, The Supper of the Lamb, A Culinary Reflection, by Robert Capon. Capon is an Episcopal Priest, a good theologian, an articulate and witty author and, it turns out, a fine cook.

"Food these days is often identified as the enemy," he writes. "Butter, salt, sugar, eggs, are all out to get you. And yet at our best, we know better. Butter is... well, butter, it glorifies almost everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs, are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together, you get not sudden death, but Hollandaise, which in its own way is not one less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip or a Bach fugue." [Preface to the Second Edition, xiii]

Capon, although he preaches balance in our culinary adventures, is probably not for the habitual calorie counters. But his perspective does help bring into focus and immediacy, a very familiar saying of Jesus'... "You are the salt of the earth."

It certainly makes popcorn interesting. That was the conclusion, by the way, of a carefully conducted scientific experiment in Biblical research in our own Church School. It is called experiential learning. I

was walking through our office this week and noticed on Deborah Kapp's door, a piece of paper which was obviously some kind of classroom worksheet. Office doors, I notice, become the equivalent of the family refrigerator. It's where you post announcements about how wonderful your children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces are or how you feel about the world in general. This worksheet on Deborah Kapp's door announced "I will be the salt of the earth by... not being a bad boy." Karen Maurer explained: The Church School curriculum follows the lectionary and therefore classes are often considering the same text as we are in worship. Not always, but often. They studied "salt of the earth" last week. I saved it for today. They talked first about how Jesus used simple examples to teach: objects people knew and understood, like salt, and like a candle. So they conducted an experiment in order to understand what salt of the earth means. They made popcorn. They ate some. Then they put salt on some and ate it. They concluded that salt makes popcorn taste better. So they further concluded that Jesus wants his people to make the world better - thus the promise to start in the process of salting the earth by staying out of trouble.

Then they turned out the lights, pulled the shades and lighted a candle. Someone put a waste basket over the candle. It got dark in the room. "You shouldn't do that if we want to see what's going on," they concluded. In fact, you can get hurt walking around in the dark.

Their final conclusions were that they could be salt and light by: not littering and by being friends and not fighting. And it occurred in a week in which my government backed away from its environmental commitment (God forbid that we should blunder into preserving the world!) - and, then, as if on cue... another deadly oil spill on the West Coast. It occurs to me that if those little ones help clean up the world and move the human family one tiny step closer to the day when peace on earth is a reality, they will have been salt of the earth and light of the world. I also concluded after reading everything I could find about this little saying of Jesus that the children got it right. You want to understand what Jesus meant? Try your popcorn without salt the next time. Your doctor will love you, but it won't be very interesting. Or turn out the lights, sit in the dark and see what you can see.

The saying occurs at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And that happens at the very beginning of St. Matthew's presentation of the story. Jesus takes the disciples up on to a mountain; the crowd of people is gathered on the mountain side, he sits down in the middle of the disciples and he says...

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn.

"Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers."

The Beatitudes, one of the most remarkable and sublime and revolutionary collections of ethical teaching in all the world. They are so radical, so contrary to the harsh reality of the world that the

disciples surely must have wondered if he was really serious. "Blessed are the poor in spirit... the meek?... Not in this world!" So they surely must have concluded that he was proposing that they, his chosen friends, withdraw from this world where the meek and merciful are more often run over rough shod rather than congratulated. "Nice guys finish last," Leo Durocher once observed. So the disciples surely thought that what Jesus was proposing is that they retreat from this world and establish a little world within the world where the meek and poor and bereaved will be blessed... Maybe even a place, an actual religious community, self-contained, enclosed, far enough from the harsh realities of the world that the peculiar new teachings of Jesus could actually be tried out. He could be the leader of the community. He could continue to teach them in that environment and they could continue to learn. They could even do the good he wanted them to do by going out into the world on occasion, to teach and preach and heal, and then return to the community.

It is an idea with no small appeal. It is still an attractive option for many people. In fact, it was a popular way of being religious in Jesus' day. There were communities of mystics who lived together in the desert, practicing a kind of radically obedient, highly disciplined Judaism. One of the famous ones around the Dead Sea was called the Essenes, a kind of monastic, highly disciplined, and highly moral community. It sounds like John the Baptist, for instance, might have been a member of one of these communities. In any event they were there and the people knew they were there and the expectation, throughout his life, was that Jesus of Nazareth would move in this direction: would take his followers out of the world and establish another world, a world within the world, a retreat, a haven, a shelter from the world's harshness and brutality and cruelty. The religion of Jesus would be essentially an "other worldly" phenomenon.

So, he sets the record straight at the beginning. The world is the focus. This world is the place they are to live in, to love and be faithful in. They are going to have to figure out how to follow him without withdrawing from the world. They are, in fact, "the salt of the earth...the light of the world."

Meaning? change it... preserve it... cleanse it... celebrate... make it tasty... All the standard studies point out that salt was important, valuable and necessary. It preserved food. It was a cleansing agent. Salt was used ceremonially in the temple (and still is employed in a Roman Catholic baptism). It was a valuable trading commodity. And it was a lovely luxury, an embellishment...it made bland food taste good. Its very nature is to quietly but dramatically alter that with which it comes in contact. So, that's what his followers are.

But, the appeal of the other-worldly focus has been persistent, consistent and some would say dominant across the centuries of Christian history. It has been assumed widely that to be religious and to be worldly are opposites. It has been assumed that to be a faithful follower of Jesus, one needs to be suspicious of the world; to regard the world as an evil place, full of temptation and sin. Being a Christian, it has been assumed, and is still widely believed, means disengaging from the world. It has been a persistent heresy.

There is a chapter on religion in Megatrends 2000, a new book by John Naisbitt and Patricia Adurdene. The authors note the decline of the traditional churches in our culture at the same time there is a dramatic increase in some kinds of religion. "In turbulent times," they propose, "times of great change, people head for two extremes: fundamentalism and personal spiritual experience." New Age religion. Although they are very different on the surface, they share a common focus. "In times of great social change, fundamentalistic religion spells out the answers for people - so they need not make decisions alone." New Age religion, on the other hand, concentrates on inner feelings, personal spirituality." Both focus somewhere other than the world. One emphasizes gaining life in another world after death. The other promises contentment and fulfillment in the interior world of personal feelings. Describing "baby boomers," the trend setters for the future, Naisbitt and Adurdene say, "they are inner directed: they don't care for existing religions, so they come out with a new kind of religion, a New Age one, a kind of atunement." [p. 277, 279, 293]

Because most religion has chosen to be other-worldly, rather than worldly, many social scientists, intellectuals, artists, long ago concluded that religion is essentially irrelevant to this life - this world, answering questions no one is asking. In the introduction to his book on Faith and Fragmentation, Philip Wogaman quotes a character in a Tom Robbins novel who expresses the intellectual tenor of the times.

"Christianity is dying of its own accord. Its most vital energies are already dead. We are living in a period of vast philosophical and psychological upheaval...and when we come out of it..we will find that many of the old mores and attitudes and doctrines will have been unrecognizably altered or eliminated altogether. One of the casualties of our present upheaval will unquestionably be Christianity." [Faith & Fragmentation, p. 3-4 from Another Roadside Attraction, Tom Robbins]

Robbins is not the first to come to that conclusion, of course. In fact, the modern intellectual mind set was formed by people who simply assumed that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, were on the way out.

Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, essentially agreed on one thing and that is that religion in general, and institutional religion in particular, was an impediment to human progress and that the human race will be happier and freer without it.

Wouldn't they be surprised to see the newspaper this morning? The hottest news is from South Africa, announcing one of the truly major revolutions, social and political, of our time... and in the middle of it - squarely in the center - between Facists on the one hand, brandishing swastikas and brown shirts, and Leninist revolutionaries, whose social orders often turn out to be more repressive than the ones they replace, in

the middle... an Anglican Bishop, Desmond Tutu; a brave, devout Anglican layman, Nelson Mandela; a Calvinist preacher, Alan Boesak... and hundreds and hundreds of Christian churches... Wouldn't they be surprised at the headline, "The God that Failed" - a summary of the sudden "imploding" of Communism... and again, at the center, the church, Solidarity, the Pope, the other Protestant churches of East Berlin.

To his modest little band of non-descript friends, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth - light of the world," and they were. And incredibly, in spite of the dire and confident predictions of the smartest among us - the followers of Jesus are still salt of the earth.

The event that touched off the Romanian revolution never made it on many front pages probably because it was only about a church and a congregation of Christians and their minister. In the western city of Timisoara, the pastor of the Reformed Church, the Romanian equivalent of Presbyterian, Laslo Toekes had spoken and acted on behalf of religious and ethnic rights before. "He had been suspended from his parishes and moved in the past when the state decided his influence was becoming too strong. Masked men broke into his church in November and threatened to kill him and his family, so he moved into the church itself with his wife, and sent their son to stay with grandparents. He was abducted, beaten by security guards, interrogated and then after his return, asked to sign a document to say that he had not been mistreated. When he refused and the police came for him again, members of his congregation formed a human chain around him to prevent his arrest. That gesture grew into the massive protests and subsequent blood bath that toppled the Ceausescu dictatorship. There was shooting; people were killed. A chant often heard in the nationwide protests was - "Timisoara! Timisoara!" [Fort Worth Star Telegram, in PC USA News, 1/5/90]

"Salt of the earth...light of the world." The world is where the action is. We make a very big mistake - a theological mistake - when we despise, withdraw from or fail to love this world, in favor of some other-worldly haven from reality and harshness and brutality. God so loved this world that a Son was given for its salvation, its reconciliation, its healing, its hope.

Robert Capon, in his delightful theological cookbook, says it deliciously:

"There is a habit that plagues many so-called spiritual minds: they imagine that matter and spirit are somehow at odds with each other and that the right course for human life is to escape from the world...into some finer and purer (and undoubtedly duller) realm... that is a crashing mistake. It was God who invented dirt, onions and turnip greens... God who at the end of each day of creation pronounced a resounding 'Good!' And it is God's unrelenting love of all the stuff of this world that keeps it in being at every moment." [op. cit., xii]

That is why the criteria by which we measure ourselves and on the basis of which we plan programs at this church is not numbers alone, but faithful expression of the Gospel in the world. That is why we pay less attention to the heavenly scorecard than we do to children tutored and houses built and apartments painted and homeless sheltered.

Now - it is just at this point that the preacher is supposed to move in for the sale and urge the people to get on board and start becoming more salty. And the temptation to do that is real. However, it is not what Jesus said or did. It is not imperative, but indicative. He doesn't order, invite or command them to become the salt of the earth... he tells them that is what they already are. They are, this modest little band of non-descripts, sitting on a hillside, in a remote outpost of the Roman Empire, they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So it's a description... a compliment. They did not aspire to change the history of the world... they simply tried to follow Jesus... and the world got changed. That's how it goes apparently.

When you follow Jesus, when you faithfully follow, accepting his Lordship, living for him, you become something you didn't intend. You become, wherever you are, **salt of the earth**. You become, wherever you live and work and have being, **light of the world**.

It is true about churches striving to live out the faith with integrity... and it is true of individuals, trying to live faithfully in the world, at work, in government, business, education, in personal and in public responsibilities.

It can be an adventure. You can find yourself in new places, doing new things. You will find yourself living more thoroughly in this world than ever before and maybe even loving it more, understanding more, how absolutely God loves this world and all its children.

God knows, the world needs that, needs a faithful church and faithful, worldly disciples.

Jesus said: "You are salt of the earth...light of the world."

Amen.

O God, lover of this world, creator of its beauty and energy, author of its hope: give us courage to love it, to live faithfully in it. Give us heart and soul and strength to be its flavoring and seasoning.... in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.